The Future Need Not Be Anti-Urban, but Neither Must It Be Ultra-Urban

Productive Rural Residence, Sustainable Decentralization, and a New Territorial Modernity

Working Paper · Version 1.0

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Abstract

This paper argues for the need to rethink the relationship between housing, rural land, urbanization, and modernity in developed economies. Its central thesis is that industrial modernity identified progress with urbanization, metropolitan concentration, and the separation of residence, production, and territory. However, this identification is no longer necessarily valid in the twenty-first century. The housing crisis, rural depopulation, energy and food dependence, the fragility of supply chains, and the saturation of major cities force us to imagine a new form of modernity: not anti-urban, but no longer necessarily ultra-urban.

To these factors one must add a deeper dimension: the emergence of civilizational risks associated with excessive concentration. Great urban areas are efficient, but they also accumulate vulnerabilities: dependence on centralized critical infrastructure, massive exposure to energy or food crises, fragility in the face of conflict, sabotage, cyberattacks, new precision weapons, drones, missiles, or logistical collapse, and the possibility that social, cultural, ethnic, or racial tensions become concentrated in dense and highly competitive spaces. Urban hyperconcentration is not merely a housing problem: it may also be a civilizational security problem.

Likewise, the fertility crisis must be incorporated as one of the major structural risks of developed economies. Societies that cannot guarantee demographic sustainability may remain economically efficient for a time, but they lose the capacity to reproduce themselves socially, culturally, and nationally. Low fertility cannot be explained by urbanism alone, but excessive urbanism contributes to it: expensive and small housing, residential instability, delayed emancipation, lack of family space, high costs of childrearing, weak community support, and metropolitan rhythms poorly suited to family formation. Conditional productive rural residence may therefore also be read as an indirect policy of demographic sustainability: it does not impose fertility, but it creates material conditions more favorable to the continuity of families, communities, and peoples.

The concrete proposal is the creation of a figure of conditional productive rural residence: a limited, regulated, and environmentally demanding form of housing on ordinary rural land,

linked to energy self-sufficiency, water management, autonomous sanitation, agricultural or territorial activity, environmental protection, and duties of landscape maintenance. This figure does not aim to urbanize the countryside or multiply scattered rural villas, but rather to allow productive rural living units where they improve the territory.

The paper begins from the Catalan and Spanish cases, but extends the analysis to Europe, the United States, China, and other developed Asian economies. The conclusion is that the future need not be anti-urban, but neither must it be ultra-urban: it may become a network of compact cities and inhabited, productive, and self-sufficient rural territories.

Keywords

Housing; rural land; urbanization; sustainable decentralization; Catalonia; Spain; Europe; United States; China; rurality; self-sufficiency; territorial modernity; land policy; regulatory land value uplift; civilizational risk; urban vulnerability; low fertility; demographic sustainability; national continuity; territorial security; civil resilience; family; metropolitan concentration; demographic decentralization.

1. Introduction

Over the last two centuries, modernity has been understood primarily as urbanization. To industrialize meant to concentrate factories, workers, capital, infrastructure, markets, universities, hospitals, administration, and culture in large urban centers. The modern city became the privileged space of progress. The countryside, by contrast, was often associated with the past, tradition, low productivity, or forms of life destined to be absorbed by the city.

This interpretation had a real historical basis. The city made possible specialization, innovation, advanced services, cultural density, and economic efficiency. Without urbanization, it is impossible to understand industrial modernity, mass democracy, the modern university, large public health systems, or much of contemporary technological development.

But the fact that historical modernity was urban does not mean that future modernity must necessarily be ultra-urban. In the twenty-first century, extreme metropolitan concentration shows obvious limits: unaffordable housing, the expulsion of young people and middle classes, infrastructure saturation, food dependence, energy fragility, disconnection from territory, and rural abandonment.

At the same time, contemporary technology enables forms of life that were previously far more difficult: photovoltaic energy, batteries, autonomous wastewater treatment, digital connectivity, partial remote work, precision agriculture, micro-production, intelligent water management, and residential systems with low dependence on centralized networks. This opens a new question: if part of modern life no longer requires absolute physical concentration, why should modern living continue to be concentrated almost exclusively in large cities?

The question becomes even more urgent once a civilizational dimension is introduced. Urban concentration has been an engine of progress, but it can also become a form of accumulated risk. A society that concentrates population, services, hospitals, administration, energy, data, food, transport, and infrastructure in a few metropolitan areas may be extraordinarily efficient in normal times, but also extraordinarily fragile in times of crisis.

This fragility can no longer be considered only in terms of natural disasters or economic crises. The twenty-first century incorporates new or intensified risks: hybrid warfare, cyberattacks, sabotage, dependence on digital networks, drones, precision missiles, supply-chain collapse, pandemics, extreme heat waves, social tensions, and identity conflicts in increasingly fragmented societies. In this context, territorial decentralization is not only a housing or rural policy. It may also be a policy of civil security, institutional continuity, and social survival.

The demographic question reinforces this thesis further. Many developed economies are highly efficient at producing income, technology, and services, but increasingly ineffective at reproducing themselves demographically. A society may have brilliant cities, high productivity, and sophisticated infrastructure while being unable to guarantee generational replacement. This forces us to ask whether the extreme metropolitan model is not generating forms of life materially hostile to the family: housing that is too expensive, spaces that are too small, life paths that are too unstable, excessive dependence on monetary wages, and a lack of community support.

For this reason, this paper is not only about housing. It is about the possibility that a new territorial architecture may also contribute to civilizational resilience: less concentration of risk, more material autonomy, more capacity for social reproduction, and greater territorial continuity.

This paper argues that the new modernity may be more territorially distributed. It is not a matter of denying the city, but of denying its monopoly. It is not about nostalgically returning to the countryside, but about bringing technological, residential, productive, and cultural capacity into the territory. It is not suburban sprawl, but sustainable decentralization.

> *The future need not be anti-urban, but neither must it be ultra-urban: it may become a network of compact cities and inhabited, productive, and self-sufficient rural territories.*

2. The Contemporary Housing Crisis as a Territorial Crisis

The housing crisis is usually interpreted as a crisis of prices, wages, rents, insufficient supply, speculation, foreign investment, tourism, or lack of public housing. All these factors matter. But there is a deeper dimension: the housing crisis is also a crisis in the territorial distribution of the right to live.

Land is not only a physical space. It is a legal, political, and economic reality. A plot may have very little value if it allows no residential use, and may multiply its value if the law recognizes a right to build. This shows that a crucial part of land value does not derive from

the land itself, but from its regulation. The difference between rural land and residential land is, to a large extent, an institutional difference.

This difference generates what may be called regulatory land value uplift. When the administration allows construction, it creates value. When it prohibits construction, it limits that value. Therefore, land policy is not a technical detail: it is one of the most important forms of wealth distribution in contemporary economies.

In many developed economies, the effective right to reside has been concentrated in a relatively small part of the territory: cities, metropolitan areas, well-connected municipalities, coastal zones, and planned urban peripheries. Meanwhile, large rural areas remain excluded from any ordinary residential possibility, even when they could physically host autonomous and environmentally responsible forms of human life.

This creates a paradox. Housing is lacking where everyone wants to live, or where everyone is forced to live, while territory is abundant where almost nobody can legally live except under highly restricted conditions. Naturally, not all territory is suitable for housing. But it is not obvious that all rural residence should be treated as a threat.

The problem is not the protection of rural land. The problem is the inability to distinguish between three very different situations:

1. Speculative scattered urbanization, which consumes territory without returning any function to it.
2. Strict environmental protection, necessary in sensitive or high-value areas.
3. Productive rural residence, which may help maintain, care for, and activate the territory.

This paper focuses on the third possibility.

The territorial crisis of housing also has a demographic dimension. When access to spacious, stable, and affordable housing is concentrated in expensive urban markets, family formation is delayed or becomes more difficult. The problem is not only having or not having a roof. It is being able to build a reproductive, intergenerational, and communal life. A shared room, an insecure rental contract, or a small apartment in an expensive metropolis are not only precarious forms of housing: they may also be material obstacles to demographic continuity.

This does not mean that low fertility is caused solely by the city. Cultural, labor, educational, gender, economic, and technological factors all intervene. But excessive urbanism and residential concentration can intensify all these factors. Expensive urban housing delays emancipation. Lack of space reduces the possibility of having more children. Dependence on two monetary salaries complicates childrearing. Metropolitan life accelerates rhythms and weakens extended family support. Childrearing becomes an extraordinarily costly logistical and financial project.

For this reason, an alternative territorial policy may have indirect demographic effects. This is not coercive natalism, nor does it reduce rural life to a reproductive function. It is about creating material conditions in which family, childrearing, and generational continuity are less incompatible with a dignified life.

3. Conditional Productive Rural Residence

The proposal consists of creating or recognizing a new legal and territorial figure: conditional productive rural residence.

This figure would allow, on certain ordinary rural lands, the construction or rehabilitation of limited housing, provided that it is linked to a verifiable agricultural, ecological, energy-related, or territorial function.

It would not be a general rezoning of rural land. It would not be an automatic right to build. It would not be a way to create disguised urban developments. Nor would it be an authorization to turn the countryside into a residential periphery of the city.

It would be a conditional authorization: the private owner obtains the possibility of living on a rural plot, and in exchange assumes strengthened duties of maintenance, production, self-sufficiency, and environmental responsibility.

Limited buildability in exchange for territorial responsibility.

Productive rural residence would only make sense if it simultaneously fulfilled several functions:

- a residential function;
- an agricultural or food-producing function;
- an environmental function;
- an energy function;
- a territorial maintenance function;
- a demographic function;
- a rebalancing function between city and countryside.

Housing thus ceases to be merely private consumption of space and becomes part of a living territorial infrastructure.

4. Not Building Villas in the Countryside, but Creating Responsible Territorial Units

An immediate objection to this proposal is that it could open the door to the destruction of rural land. This objection is legitimate. There have been enough experiences of disorderly urban growth, municipal corruption, absurd developments, and speculative consumption of territory to distrust any proposal that speaks of building on rural land.

For this reason, a radical distinction must be drawn between the rural villa and the productive rural residential unit.

The rural villa is a private appropriation of landscape. It often produces nothing, cares for nothing, depends on the car, consumes water, requires services, fragments the territory, and transforms the countryside into a weak extension of the city.

The productive rural residential unit, by contrast, only makes sense if it is linked to a territorial function. It may include vegetable gardens, fruit trees, olive groves, vineyards,

agroforestry, small livestock, beekeeping, forest management, restoration of terraces and dry-stone walls, maintenance of paths, fire prevention, renewable energy production, autonomous wastewater treatment, and systems for collecting or efficiently using water.

Not every house in the countryside is positive. But neither is every house in the countryside negative. The difference is not formal, but functional. The question should not only be "is there housing?", but "what does this housing do for the territory?"

5. Regulatory Land Value Uplift as a Pact

The granting of residential authorization on rural land creates an increase in value. This increase should not be denied or hidden. Precisely because it exists, it can become the basis of the pact.

A rural plot may have limited value as long as it only allows agricultural use. If it is granted a residential possibility, even a limited one, its value increases. This uplift may compensate the owner for the economic effort required: solar panels, batteries, wastewater treatment systems, plantations, maintenance, insurance, firebreaks, paths, ponds, waste management, and other investments.

This allows for a fair exchange structure:

- the owner receives a valuable right;
- the administration does not grant that right without conditions;
- the territory receives an environmental and productive counterpart;
- the community recovers part of the value created through duties, fees, or obligations.

The central question is not whether the owner may partially benefit from the authorization. The question is whether this private benefit is linked to a public function. Regulatory land value uplift is acceptable if it is not pure privilege, but a territorial contract.

6. Catalonia: A Laboratory for a New Territorial Modernity

Catalonia is an especially suitable case for thinking through this proposal. It has a strongly pressured metropolitan area, important medium-sized cities, saturated coastal zones and, at the same time, an inland Catalonia marked by depopulation, ageing, loss of services, and abandonment of rural plots.

Catalan territory is not empty, but it is unbalanced. Population, economy, and opportunity are concentrated in very specific areas. Meanwhile, many small municipalities struggle to maintain schools, commerce, healthcare services, transport, and economic activity. The countryside is often preserved as landscape, but not always as a living space.

In this context, productive rural residence could have a dual function. On the one hand, it would offer an alternative path to housing for people or families willing to assume a real rural life, not merely a decorative one. On the other hand, it would help restore human presence in areas where the problem is not excessive construction, but abandonment.

Catalonia could develop this figure very cautiously, excluding protected lands, natural areas, high-risk forest zones, ecological corridors, and high-value agricultural lands incompatible with transformation. But on ordinary rural land, with sufficient plot size and strict conditions, it could allow productive rural housing linked to territorial management plans.

The proposal fits especially well with a polycentric vision of the country: Barcelona as a major center, yes, but not as the only horizon. Strong medium-sized cities, living villages, productive farms, protected natural spaces, and distributed digital infrastructure. This is a more resilient Catalonia than a merely metropolitan Catalonia.

7. Spain: Housing, Depopulation, and Land Policy

In Spain, the contrast between urban residential scarcity and the relative abundance of rural land is very intense. Large metropolitan areas and tourist zones face enormous pressure, while many inland areas suffer low density, ageing, and population loss.

The usual response to the housing crisis focuses on building more on urban land, mobilizing vacant housing, limiting rents, expanding public housing, or rehabilitating buildings. All these measures may be necessary. But they leave out one question: can part of the solution come from rural territory?

Spain has an urban planning history that demands great caution. Real estate bubbles, municipal corruption, ghost developments, and the destruction of coastal areas have left a negative memory. But precisely for this reason, a distinction must be made between speculative liberalization and conditional authorization.

Productive rural residence should not become a new land bubble. It should be an anti-speculative figure. It should prevent mass parceling, limit opportunistic transfers, impose registered burdens, and require ongoing compliance.

Instead of asking “how can we urbanize more?”, the question should be: “how can we allow rural life without producing urbanization?”

This question is especially relevant in a country where demographic decline, agricultural abandonment, wildfires, and the housing access crisis coincide.

8. Europe: Beyond the Compact City

Europe has rightly defended the compact city, land protection, the reduction of land consumption, and the fight against urban sprawl. This orientation is necessary. The European continent cannot afford infinite suburban expansion, nor can it sacrifice high-value agricultural and natural soils.

But the defense of the compact city should not imply the denial of all new rural habitability. Europe also needs territorial cohesion, food sovereignty, energy transition, wildfire prevention, village recovery, and maintenance of agrarian landscapes.

The European contradiction is that it often protects territory as land, but not always as life. A landscape without farmers, without residents, without local economy, and without generational continuity may appear preserved, but may be socially dead. Passive protection is not always sufficient.

Productive rural residence could be part of a new European pact between city and countryside. It would not replace urban densification policies, but complement them. Europe could maintain compact cities and, at the same time, allow self-sufficient rural units where they contribute to ecological and territorial goals.

This is consistent with an ecological modernity: less dependence, more proximity, more local production, more distributed energy, and more responsibility over land.

Europe should incorporate this issue into its reflection on territorial cohesion. The continent does not face only a housing problem or a problem of rural ageing, but also a problem of demographic and cultural sustainability. European societies may be wealthy, peaceful, and highly urbanized, but if they cannot guarantee generational replacement, they will end up depending on permanent compensatory mechanisms: mass immigration, debt, automation, longer working lives, or the gradual contraction of welfare systems.

Sustainable decentralization could be part of a broader response. Family policies cannot be limited to subsidies or parental leave if the territorial and residential structure continues to make family formation very difficult. A Europe of compact cities, living villages, and productive rural residences could offer greater diversity of life forms, more residential stability, and more material space for family continuity.

This idea does not replace individual rights or reproductive freedom. On the contrary: it makes them more real. The freedom to have children does not fully exist if material conditions turn childrearing into an urban luxury.

9. The United States: A Warning Against Unproductive Suburbia

The United States offers an important lesson. Much of its twentieth-century residential development was based on extensive suburbs, single-family homes, low density, car dependence, and rigid zoning. This model allowed many families to access housing, but it also generated enormous costs: land consumption, social segregation, energy dependence, expensive infrastructure, and weakened urban cores.

For this reason, the proposal defended in this paper cannot resemble the American suburb. It is not about multiplying isolated houses dependent on roads, parking, gasoline, and big-box retail. That would not be a new territorial modernity, but conventional scattered urbanization.

At the same time, the United States shows something else: local regulation can create artificial housing scarcity. Zoning restrictions, minimum lot sizes, bans on multifamily housing, and neighborhood opposition can make even a geographically vast country suffer from extremely expensive cities.

The lesson is double. On the one hand, bad dispersion is a problem. On the other, regulatory rigidity is also a problem. Conditional productive rural residence seeks to avoid both extremes: neither unproductive suburbia nor absolute blockage.

10. China: Accelerated Urbanization and the Political Value of Land

China represents a different but highly revealing case. Its recent development has been deeply linked to urbanization, the transformation of rural land into urban land, and the role of land in local government finance. Chinese urbanization has been an extraordinary tool of growth, but it has also generated imbalances, bubbles, real estate dependence, and tensions between rural and urban worlds.

In China, land is not merely a private asset. It is a central element of the state, development, and planning. This shows that land is always political. Real estate value is not a natural phenomenon: it depends on rights, permits, transformations, infrastructure, and institutions.

China also shows the danger of identifying modernity with massive urbanization. For decades, millions of people moved from countryside to city as part of development. But a mature economy cannot rely indefinitely on construction and urban expansion. It must rebalance territory, consumption, production, demography, and sustainability.

A policy of productive rural residence in China would take a form different from that of Catalonia or Europe, but the underlying question is the same: how can the countryside cease to be merely a source of labor, a land reserve, or a space subordinated to the city, and instead become an active part of modernity?

11. Developed Asia: Efficient Density and Rural Emptying

Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and other developed Asian economies show that urban density can be highly efficient. They have advanced public transport systems, compact cities, high technology, and a strong culture of urban organization. In this respect, they partly correct the American suburban model.

But they also suffer from metropolitan concentration, rural ageing, and territorial imbalance. Japan is paradigmatic: highly dynamic major cities coexist with ageing villages, empty houses, and rural territories losing population.

The Asian case also forces us to introduce a deeper question: demographic sustainability. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and urban China show the extent to which a society can become urbanly efficient and, at the same time, demographically fragile. Their cities may operate with great technical precision; their transport systems may be excellent; their economies may produce advanced technology; their administrations may be highly effective. But this functional effectiveness does not by itself guarantee the reproduction of society.

This distinction is central: a civilization may be efficient and yet ineffective in its own continuity. It may optimize transport, small housing units, offices, schools, hospitals, logistics, and industrial production, while failing to generate enough conditions for families to want or be able to have children. Urban efficiency may reduce economic frictions, but it can also create highly compressed, competitive, and costly forms of life that are poorly compatible with childrearing.

In this sense, developed Asia is a warning to Europe. Clean, dense, safe, and technologically advanced cities are not enough. If those cities do not allow demographic sustainability, the model remains incomplete. A nation is not preserved only through GDP, technology, public transport, and urban discipline. It also needs homes, children, generational replacement, family space, cultural continuity, and territorial rootedness.

Low fertility in Asia cannot be attributed solely to urbanism. Long working hours, educational pressure, childrearing costs, gender inequalities, rigid labor markets, corporate culture, real estate prices, and social expectations all intervene. But hyperurbanization acts as an amplifier: it concentrates costs, reduces space, accelerates competition, and turns family formation into an increasingly expensive and difficult decision.

Conditional productive rural residence would not be a complete solution to this crisis, but it could form part of a broader civilizational response: making it possible again for part of the population to live in environments with more space, more material autonomy, greater food proximity, stronger community networks, and less dependence on metropolitan costs. In economies with extreme low fertility, this possibility is not merely residential; it may be a condition of national continuity.

South Korea concentrates a huge share of its activity around Seoul. Taiwan combines density, territorial pressure, and the need to protect productive land. The Asian lesson is that the dense city can work very well, but it does not resolve the entire territorial question. A society can have efficient cities and still suffer rural abandonment, food dependence, or generational fracture of the territory.

For this reason, the proposal of this paper does not oppose city and countryside, but seeks to articulate them. The dense city is necessary; but rural territory must also be able to contain modern forms of life.

Thus, the Asian challenge is not only to prevent rural emptying. It is to prevent urban efficiency from becoming civilizational sterility. A society cannot be considered fully modern if its dominant form of life is incompatible with social reproduction. Modernity cannot be measured only by the speed of trains, the height of buildings, or the density of neighborhoods, but also by the capacity of a political community to continue existing without biologically, culturally, and familiarly exhausting its members.

12. The New Modernity: From Concentration to Distribution

Industrial modernity concentrated. It concentrated factories, labor, population, capital, infrastructure, energy, and administration. This concentration generated enormous productivity gains. But it also produced dependencies.

Ecological modernity may follow a different logic. It may distribute energy through renewables, distribute work through digital connectivity, distribute food production through proximity agriculture, distribute culture through networks, and distribute residence through forms of housing that are not exclusively urban.

The question is not to abandon density. Density remains useful. The question is to prevent density from becoming a monopoly. A mature society should be able to combine:

- large compact cities;
- strong medium-sized cities;
- living villages;
- productive rural housing;
- protected natural spaces;
- proximity agriculture;
- distributed energy;
- universal digital infrastructure.

Such a network would be more resilient than a society based on a few oversized metropolitan areas.

Future modernity may be less radial and more reticular. Less centered on one dominant metropolis and more based on diverse nodes. Less dependent on massive flows and more capable of generating partial self-sufficiency. Less abstract and more rooted.

13. Sustainable Spreading, Not Irresponsible Dispersion

The word “spreading” may raise concerns, because it is often associated with planning disorder. But here it must be given a precise meaning. To spread does not mean to build without criteria. It means to distribute the capacity for life where the territory can sustain it and benefit from it.

Sustainable spreading is not about scattered houses, but about distributed functions:

- distributed energy;
- distributed food;
- distributed territorial maintenance;
- distributed residence;
- distributed culture;
- distributed responsibility.

Irresponsible dispersion consumes territory. Sustainable spreading reactivates it.

Irresponsible dispersion demands expensive public services. Sustainable spreading reduces dependence through self-sufficiency.

Irresponsible dispersion turns the countryside into suburbia. Sustainable spreading turns the countryside into inhabited and productive territory.

Irresponsible dispersion separates residence and responsibility. Sustainable spreading unites them.

This distinction is the core of the paper.

14. Strict Conditions for Productive Rural Residence

For the proposal to be defensible, it must be subject to rigorous conditions. Some of them could be the following.

14.1. Only Ordinary Rural Land

The figure should apply only to ordinary or common rural land. Protected areas, flood-prone zones, high-risk forest land, critical ecological corridors, areas of incompatible high agricultural value, and territories with unresolved water scarcity should be excluded.

14.2. Sufficient Minimum Plot Size

A minimum surface area should be required to avoid fragmentation. This surface should vary according to territory, rainfall, type of cultivation, access, slope, and rural structure. The objective is to prevent pseudo-urban developments.

14.3. Limited and Integrated Housing

The dwelling should have a limited surface area, energy efficiency criteria, landscape integration, appropriate materials, and low land occupation. Large rural mansions disguised as agricultural projects should not be allowed.

14.4. Energy Self-Sufficiency

The plot should produce a substantial share of its energy through renewable systems. Grid connection may be possible, but the logic should be one of low dependence and high efficiency.

14.5. Legal Water and Safe Sanitation

No rural residence can justify aquifer pollution or irregular water extraction. Legal water availability and an approved sanitation system should be required: biological treatment plant, adequate septic system, certified dry sanitation, or equivalent.

14.6. Agricultural or Territorial Plan

The owner should submit an activity plan: cultivation, vegetable garden, fruit trees, small livestock, beekeeping, agroforestry, forest management, restoration of terraces, fire prevention, or other territorial functions.

14.7. Permanent Obligations

The obligations should be attached to the land and transferred to future owners. This would prevent someone from obtaining authorization through a project and later selling the property as a mere rural house.

14.8. Inspection and Sanction

There should be periodic control. Serious breach could entail sanctions, execution of guarantees, loss of benefits, or restrictions of use.

14.9. Partial Capture of Land Value Uplift

The increase in value generated by the authorization could justify fees, environmental guarantees, or contributions to local rural maintenance funds. Not as punishment, but as a community return on value created by regulation.

15. Compatibility with the Compact City

This proposal does not replace urban policy. Cities still need affordable housing, rehabilitation, well-designed densification, public transport, limits on speculation, public housing stock, rent regulation, and neighborhood improvement.

Productive rural residence cannot solve the housing crisis by itself. It would be absurd to present it as a single solution. But it may be a very important complementary piece, because it expands the field of possibilities.

The final model is not a city dissolved into the countryside. It is a balanced network:

- compact and efficient cities;
- less pressured metropolitan areas;
- medium-sized cities with services;
- revitalized villages;
- inhabited and productive farms;
- protected natural spaces;
- distributed energy;
- proximity agriculture;
- living territorial culture.

This model is more sophisticated than the binary alternative between urbanization and depopulation.

16. Critique of the False Equivalence Between Progress and Metropolis

One of the most powerful ideas to be challenged is the false equivalence between progress and metropolis. For a long time, a society seemed more modern the more urban it was. But this criterion is insufficient.

A society is not necessarily more advanced because it concentrates more population in less territory. It may simply be more dependent, more expensive, more vulnerable, and more unequal. Progress should not be measured only by the degree of urbanization, but by the capacity to offer dignified life, material autonomy, ecological sustainability, social cohesion, and territorial continuity.

The city can be a tool of progress, but it is not the only one. Technological, productive, and self-sufficient rurality can also be modern. A dwelling with solar energy, autonomous sanitation, food production, digital connection, and environmental responsibility is not a premodern relic. It may be an advanced form of contemporary life.

Modernity should not be defined by the degree of separation from the land, but by the capacity to inhabit it intelligently.

17. Property as Territorial Responsibility

The proposal presupposes a demanding idea of property. Land ownership cannot be understood only as a power of exclusion or patrimonial accumulation. Land is a special good: it is not individually produced, it structures collective life, affects the environment, and generates externalities.

For this reason, when the state recognizes a building right, it is legitimate to require a social function. This function should not be rhetorical. It must be translated into verifiable duties.

Productive rural residence is based on this idea: one may be allowed to inhabit the territory if that inhabitation entails care, production, and maintenance. Property does not disappear, but it becomes linked to responsibility.

This also connects with a broader conception of freedom. Freedom is not only the ability to do whatever one wants with a plot of land. It is also the ability to build forms of life less dependent on urban rents, metropolitan wages, centralized energy, and distant food consumption. But this freedom is only legitimate if it does not become territorial destruction.

18. Risks and Objections

The proposal involves important risks, and they must be recognized.

18.1. Risk of Speculation

If the market interprets that any rural land may become residential, prices may rise artificially. For this reason, the figure must be limited, technical, conditional, and non-automatic.

18.2. Risk of Local Corruption

Discretionary authorizations may generate corruption. Objective criteria, public registries, independent technical reports, and administrative traceability are necessary.

18.3. Environmental Risk

Without controls, rural residence may damage aquifers, landscapes, biodiversity, and agricultural soils. Sensitive areas must therefore be excluded, and sanitation, legal water, clean energy, and management plans must be required.

18.4. Class Bias Risk

The measure could benefit only people with capital. To avoid this, cooperatives, land leases, surface rights, modern sharecropping or stewardship arrangements, green financing, young farmer programs, and non-speculative access models should be explored.

18.5. Risk of Fake Agricultural Activity

Some owners might simulate cultivation or activity in order to obtain authorization. Minimum thresholds, controls, and consequences should be defined.

18.6. Risk of Car Dependence

Rural life may increase travel. Priority should be given to plots near villages, existing roads, local networks, and reasonable connectivity, avoiding absurd isolation.

18.7. Inverse Civilizational Risk: Excessive Concentration Is Also Dangerous

A common objection to any decentralization is that it may generate inefficiency, dispersion, and public costs. This objection is relevant. But the inverse objection must also be formulated: concentrating too much may be equally dangerous.

Urban hyperconcentration creates economies of scale, but it also concentrates vulnerabilities. A great metropolis depends on complex and centralized systems: electricity, water, sanitation, hospitals, transport, data, food, fuels, security, logistics, and public order. When these systems function, the city is extraordinarily efficient. When they fail, collapse can be rapid and massive.

This vulnerability is especially relevant in a world of hybrid risks: cyberattacks, sabotage, pandemics, urban warfare, drones, missiles, energy blockades, food crises, and social tensions. The city concentrates population, but also targets, dependencies, and critical points. For this reason, a more distributed society may be a more resilient society.

This does not mean abandoning cities. It means avoiding a situation in which all national life depends on a few metropolitan concentrations. Sustainable decentralization may function as a civilizational insurance policy: if one part of the country fails, another continues to function; if one network falls, other units maintain energy, food, water, and community life.

18.8. Demographic Risk: An Efficient but Infertile Society

Another often ignored risk is that the extreme urban model may contribute to an efficient but infertile society. Major cities may maximize productivity, consumption, cultural supply, and labor mobility, but they may also make emancipation, residential stability, childrearing, and family life more difficult.

Low fertility is not merely an aggregate individual preference. It may also be the result of a material environment that makes family increasingly difficult. If housing is expensive, small,

and insecure; if distances are long; if time is scarce; if childrearing is very expensive; if family networks disperse; and if the economy requires full labor availability, fertility falls even when many people would like to have more children.

Conditional productive rural residence does not impose any family model. But it can widen the material conditions of possibility for family life: more space, more stability, more self-production, less absolute monetary dependence, more intergenerational contact, and more rootedness. In this sense, it may also be a policy of demographic sustainability.

These risks do not invalidate the proposal, but they require careful design.

19. A Possible Legal Architecture

A public policy based on this idea could be structured as follows.

Article 1. Purpose

To regulate conditional productive rural residence as an exceptional figure of habitability on ordinary rural land, linked to agricultural, environmental, energy-related, and territorial functions.

Article 2. Scope

Applicable only to ordinary rural land that meets conditions of suitability, safety, access, water availability, and environmental compatibility.

Article 3. Exclusions

Protected land, flood-prone land, high-risk forest land, critical ecological corridors, zones with severe water scarcity, and spaces of incompatible high environmental value are excluded.

Article 4. Plot Requirements

Minimum surface area, existing or low-impact access, legal water availability, sanitation capacity, absence of serious environmental risk, and suitability for agricultural or territorial function.

Article 5. Housing Requirements

Limited size, high energy efficiency, landscape integration, appropriate materials, low land occupation, and impossibility of generating a residential nucleus.

Article 6. Territorial Management Plan

The owner must submit a plan with verifiable agricultural, environmental, or territorial activity.

Article 7. Self-Sufficiency

The dwelling must demonstrate renewable energy capacity, legal water management, safe sanitation, and waste management.

Article 8. Permanent Burdens

The obligations shall be attached to the land and enforceable against successive owners.

Article 9. Control

The administration may inspect compliance with the conditions and require updates to the plan.

Article 10. Breach

Serious breach may entail sanctions, execution of guarantees, loss of benefits, or restrictions of use.

20. Possible Applications

Productive rural residence could have several applications:

1. Families seeking to combine partial agricultural production and remote work.
2. Young farmers needing housing linked to a plot.
3. Small self-sufficiency cooperatives.
4. Projects for the recovery of abandoned land.
5. Contemporary rural stewardship or tenancy models with environmental duties.
6. Farms dedicated to local food production.
7. Fire prevention projects through stable human presence.
8. Rural housing for artisans, trades, and clean micro-industry.
9. Recovery of existing buildings with productive function.
10. Public programs for territorial rebalancing.
11. Family projects designed to combine housing, childrearing, food production, and partial self-sufficiency.
12. Support policies for young families willing to settle in rural environments under productive and environmental obligations.
13. Civil resilience programs aimed at reducing absolute dependence on major metropolises and centralized infrastructure.
14. Territorial units with minimum capacity for energy, water, food, and community maintenance in crisis situations.

15. Demographic continuity strategies for villages, counties, stateless nations, minority nations, or territories suffering loss of generational replacement.

The figure could begin with limited and evaluable pilot projects. It would not need to be applied massively from the outset. In fact, it would be preferable to begin cautiously and measure impacts.

21. The Cultural Dimension: Restoring the Centrality of Territory

Beyond economics and urban planning, this proposal has a cultural dimension. Modern societies have tended to turn territory into landscape, resource, or commodity. But territory is also memory, language, ways of life, practical knowledge, food, seasons, paths, trees, water, and community.

When the countryside empties, it is not only population that disappears. Territorial culture disappears. A way of knowing when to plant, how to prune, how to retain water, how to maintain terraces, how to read the weather, how to prevent fires, and how to use local resources disappears.

Productive rural residence could help restore this continuity, but not as folklore. It is not about reproducing the past, but about creating a new modern rural culture: technological, ecological, productive, and rooted.

Cultural continuity also has a demographic basis. A language, a nation, or a historical community is not maintained only through institutions, schools, museums, or symbols. It needs families, intergenerational transmission, everyday life, territorial rootedness, and communal density. When population concentrates in uprooted metropolises, with high mobility, unstable housing, and low fertility, cultural transmission weakens.

This is especially relevant for national communities without large state apparatuses of their own, or for languages under pressure. Cultural continuity cannot depend only on educational or media policies. It also needs a territorial structure that allows stable, family-based, and community-based forms of life. In this sense, productive rurality may have a cultural function: not as a museum of the past, but as a living infrastructure of transmission.

This culture may be especially important for countries such as Catalonia, where language, territory, local economy, and historical continuity are deeply connected. A country is not only a capital city. It is a network of inhabited places.

22. Conclusion

The contemporary housing crisis cannot be solved only by thinking in terms of urban square meters. We must also think about the territorial distribution of life. Developed economies have inherited an idea of modernity based on urban concentration. This idea was productive for a long time, but today it shows limits.

The future need not be anti-urban. Cities will remain indispensable. But neither must it be ultra-urban. An advanced society can combine compact cities with inhabited, productive, and self-sufficient rural territories.

Conditional productive rural residence is a tool for thinking through this transition. It is not an invitation to build indiscriminately in the countryside. It is a proposal to allow rural life when that life assumes duties superior to those of ordinary residence: to produce, care, maintain, regenerate, and make the territory more resilient.

This proposal must also be understood as a response to two risks that urban policies often address separately or insufficiently: the risk of civilizational concentration and the risk of structural low fertility.

The first risk is that an excessively concentrated society may be very efficient, but also very vulnerable. If national life depends on a few metropolises, any crisis affecting those metropolises — energy, military, food, climate, health, logistics, or social crisis — may have systemic effects. Sustainable decentralization is therefore a form of resilience.

The second risk is that an excessively urban society may become hostile to its own reproduction. When housing, time, space, and childrearing become too expensive, fertility falls. And when fertility remains below replacement capacity for a long time, the issue is not only pensions or the labor market: it is a problem of social, cultural, and national continuity.

Conditional productive rural residence does not by itself solve these risks, but it introduces a missing piece: a territorial policy capable of linking housing, self-sufficiency, family, production, security, and continuity. It is not a flight from the city. It is a way to ensure that civilization does not depend only on the city.

Industrial modernity concentrated. Ecological modernity may redistribute.

Industrial modernity separated residence, production, and territory. The new modernity may reconnect them.

Industrial modernity made the city the almost exclusive center of progress. The new modernity may turn the whole territory into an infrastructure of life.

The final formula is this:

> *The future need not be anti-urban, but neither must it be ultra-urban: it may become a network of compact cities and inhabited, productive, and self-sufficient rural territories.*

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